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Dinner together: Using experiential learning to build human connections in a social service setting

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ABSTRACT
Innovative pedagogical approaches are needed to teach community practice in this time of rapid community change and political polarization. Bridging the Gap Together is an ongoing experiential learning project with undergraduate social work students and a qualitative study designed to enhance “poverty awareness” and increase social connection among members of a rural, poor community. Students express an increased and deepened understanding of poverty post-experience. Their reflections also capture an awareness of the importance of human connection and the potential of compassionate professionalism to foster its development.

Innovative approaches to address rural poverty and social isolation are essential in this time of rapid community and technological change. Social work education could contribute significantly to the preparation of social workers for rural poverty practice, but challenges in equipping social work students with “poverty awareness” persist (Davis & Wainwright, 2005, p. 229; Frank et al., 2019; Frank & Rice, 2017). Despite social work’s unequivocal stance regarding the role of social work professionals in alleviating poverty and commitments to aiding those who are living in isolation, education programs fall short in their curricula, addressing both poverty and social exclusion superficially (Krummer-Nevo et al., 2009). Further, some have argued that that poverty is normalized in social work practice because such a large segment of the client population lives in poverty. The result is a perception that poverty is a natural context rather than a problem (Jones, 2002, as cited in Krummer-Nevo et al., 2009; and Walker & Walker, 2002, as cited in, Krummer-Nevo et al., 2009).

The impact of a drift from poverty awareness seems related to an increased emphasis on clinical skills that render supplying material assistance outside the realm of “real” or “professional” social work (Krummer-Nevo & Lev-Wiesel, 2005). In this context, the working alliance – the relationship that develops between social worker and client – could buffer against social isolation, but its
capacity may be limited by practitioners who are not fully aware of clients’ most pressing needs and problems.

These concerns are not new. In the classic critique of social work delivered in 1915, Flexner highlighted an inherent tension in the social work profession that continues to hold sway today. Prescott’s (2019) concerns about social work’s use of contextual knowledge, science, and critical thinking to animate good intentions and vigorous advocacy in pursuit of social justice persist. Prescott’s (2019) primary concern seems to be that social work will “become(s) so enamored with the righteousness of its causes” that it loses rigor and its dedication to science (p. 40). Other writers, however, are concerned by the greater pull toward professional success and higher-status “scientific” work. Researchers have posited that social work is undercut by its self-conscious pursuit of professional identity. From “people processing” (Hasenfeld, 1972) to narrow (psychiatric) clinical practice, social work’s history is populated by interventions that led the profession away from its “moral core” (Bisman, 2002) and reinforced the marginalization of those living in poverty (Reisch, 2017). Finally, “hyperprofessionalism,” described by Shapin (2005) as an orientation to academics that includes self-referentiality, self-absorption, and a narrowing of intellectual focus, may exacerbate attempts to meet the complex problems created by poverty and compromise the efforts of educators to provide students with a broad view of clients. Innovations that allow social work educators to provide poverty awareness and teach empathy and human connection in social work education can bridge the gap that separates “us” from “them,” while laying a foundation for more effective anti-poverty strategies. Bridging the Gap Together couples experiential classroom learning with an intervention and ongoing qualitative research.

**Literature review**

**Social work mission and pedagogy, mismatched**

Social work’s commitment to addressing poverty is abundantly clear. The NASW Code of Ethics and the profession’s self-definition as expressed by the International Federation of Social Workers underscore the defining role of poverty-related work in social work practice. Schools that endeavor to prepare students for this work have been criticized for not doing an adequate job. One issue is that academic programs that do address poverty, do so only superficially. In an often-cited review of schools of social work in the U.S., Harding et al. (2005) found that of the top 50 schools, only 12 offered one or more courses in the field of poverty.

Though concerns about the limitations of social work pedagogy are well-documented, solutions are limited. Little is said regarding the integration of such learning into social work curricula. A literature survey on teaching poverty in
social work classrooms found few clear recommendations (Krummer-Nerio et al., 2009). Further, educating students to respond to rural poverty with compassion requires innovative approaches to teach empathy and “poverty awareness” (Davis & Wainwright, 2005, p. 229; Frank et al., 2019).

**Utilizing experiential learning**

Experiential learning has a long and valued history in education (Kolb, 1984) and has been found to be effective in social work education (Frank, et al., 2019; Segal, 2007; Timm et al., 2011). According to Kolb (1984), experiential learning is an active learning process and is not focused on outcomes. Instead, it provides an opportunity to challenge prior beliefs and assumptions (Bonncastle & Bonnycastle, 2015), increase exposure to new information (Segal, 2007), and provide for greater self-awareness (Timm et al., 2011). Experiential learning differs from field education in that it does not require the application of knowledge, skills, or values, which field education does (Bogo & Sewell, 2019).

Our experiential learning activity is similar to in-class simulations (e.g., Star Power) that aim to increase students’ awareness of poverty and structural inequality. Star Power has endured as an effective poverty awareness tool (Prince et al., 2015); however, it does not require students to interact with people experiencing poverty. Our method parallels many aspects of Kubiak and Milanovic (2017) Inside-Out Exchange Program, although our community participants are less vulnerable and more engaged.

**Releasing tension, finding connection: cultivating compassionate professionalism**

In social work, a trend toward hyperprofessionalism (Shapin, 2005) may obscure our mission of social justice and deepen the divide between client and practitioner. While hyperprofessionalism in social work has been discussed by others (e.g., Howard, 2010) in divergent ways, here, we are concerned with hyperprofessionalism’s relationship with poverty and social disconnection. Hyperprofessionalism may stratify the social worker/client relationship, identify the worker as the expert, and truncate the humanity of both roles. The overt pursuit of hyperprofessionalism requires social workers to seek external validation and credentialing while maintaining “appropriate distance” from clients. Clients are constructed as “individuals in need” and assessed from the professional social worker’s expert point of view. Agencies, practitioners, and schools often align service models and curricula with these objectives. In pursuit of innovative ways to teach students deeper empathy and poverty understanding, hyperprofessionalism can act as a pedagogical barrier. Experiential learning is one effective method to overcome this (Frank et al., 2019). The Bridging the Gap Together project uses experiential learning to demonstrate another path of social
work professionalism that realigns the relationship between the social worker and the community.

**Methodology**

The study discussed here is a qualitative study with participant observation and a semi-structured group interview (Padgett, 2008). Field notes are recommended to establish contextual information and to track themes and details (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002; Lofland, 2006; Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). We utilized field notes and a post-event questionnaire to learn more about the interactions between first-year students and agency participants at a dinner event.

**Study site and event details**

The Community Center is a small, faith-based nonprofit organization located in a rural area. The organization provides a variety of social welfare services and resources to attend to poverty. Using an empowerment approach, the clients are called “community members” or “participants,” and there is an intentional emphasis on fostering a family-like environment. The researchers worked very closely with staff from the organization to ensure mutual benefit to both students and agency participants, paying close attention to the social and emotional needs of the agency participants. Our project supported the Community Center’s existing initiatives for increasing engagement in their programs. It is important to note that Community Center participants were eager to participate.

In Fall 2018, 19 students from a social work course on poverty and 20 community members participated in *Bridging the Gap Together*, a collaborative meal and experiential learning event. Students who chose not to participate were provided with an alternative assignment. Agency participants were offered small incentives akin to points that accumulate toward the purchase of items from the Center’s food pantry.

Prior to the face-to-face experience, students and agency participants were matched by the instructor and Center staff for a brief written correspondence exchange. This served to provide a more comfortable initial meet up between the students and community members. While the content of the letters is not discussed here, the letters included varied topics, such as financial issues, music interests, relationships (including family and pets), and encouragement. Content analysis of the letters is slated for a future publication.

Before dinner, students took a rural resources tour in groups, narrated by agency staff. Students collected field notes about the types of resources that they would typically need if living in the area. They struggled to identify what they considered to be adequate resources. After students returned to the
agency, community members began to arrive for dinner. The agency’s empowerment perspective was evident as it was clear that participants felt “at home,” and students were visiting as invited guests. Students and participants engaged in an “ice-breaker” activity that helped facilitate connection between the students and participants. Next, students and participants shared dinner together. Students were seated with their “pen pal,” meeting them for the first time in person.

Following dinner, students and participants sat in chairs in a large circle and were invited to participate in a semi-structured group interview addressing life experiences of both the participants and the students. Community members were reminded that participation was optional. Prior to the event, students had crafted anonymous questions, primarily about rural poverty, to be asked to the large group. Agency participants were invited to craft questions for the students about college life. These questions were collected, sorted, and selected by the researchers and then asked to the group, offering everyone the opportunity to answer freely.

**Data collection**

Multiple researchers utilized laptop computers and pen/paper to collect field notes that included data from the rural resources tour; observations made during dinner; notes on body language, conversation content, and noise level; and the responses given in the open semi-structured group interview. Questions produced by both students and participants were utilized in data collection, as were the articulated answers offered in the large-group setting. In class during the week following the event, students were invited by their instructor to reflect upon their experiences, with prompts such as: *Did you connect with anyone in particular from the Community Center during this event? We all make judgments about people before we meet them; were any of your judgments challenged? Describe the benefits/drawbacks of connecting with potential clients in these ways (e.g., letters, a meal)?*

**Data analysis**

The research team conducted a thematic content analysis of field notes and of student posttest reflection questionnaires (Padgett, 2008). Field notes and reflections were first coded independently by the researchers for themes, using an open-coding process (Padgett, 2008), and then reorganized according to these themes. Data were then uploaded to Nvivo for analysis by the research team. These themes were discussed among the researchers to generate overarching themes. Any differences in thematic analysis among the researchers were discussed until a consensus was reached. Outlying data were bracketed for future research.
Results and themes

Understanding of poverty
The theme of avoiding personal judgments of participants became paramount. Students’ reflections included: “Rural poverty cannot always be seen. Everything is spread out and you may not know someone needs help unless you walk over and communicate face to face.” “I learned about the struggles of rural poverty. Hearing them talk about not being able to get a ride because they don’t have a car and they can’t just hop on a bus or subway made me feel awful inside.” “Living in poverty is very difficult and to never judge someone for being in poverty because you do not know what happened to them for them to be in that situation.” “Always be kind to people because chances are, you don’t know the full story.”

Need for personal connections
Students articulated that human connection is necessary and warranted, some noting that The Community Center seems effective in creating a community of acceptance. One student shared, “I learned that these programs or places bring people together and create a sense of community.” Another noted, “I learned that everyone needs love. As a young person, we shouldn’t focus so much on our phones and we should be spreading positivity and love. Make a community with everyone.” When asked if they felt connected with anyone at the event, many students noted that they did feel an increased connection, especially with their pen pal. Students tended to use their pen pal’s name during class discussion. Field notes corroborated these findings; students appeared at greater ease as the evening unfolded. Further, analysis of field notes identified casual conversations at the tables with topics such as school, hobbies, children, and sports.

Suspension of personal judgments
Many students confirmed that their judgments and biases were challenged by the event. For example, students tended to offer that they held a preconceived notion of what poverty would “look like,” one that was challenged by meeting individuals face to face. Students noted that they had thought poverty would come across as “dirty” or “moody” and were surprised to find many of the participants “nice, talkative, and friendly” and that some were “highly intellectual.” Several students noted that they thought the participants would be younger. Students also were surprised to witness the willingness of the participants to share the details of their challenges. Field notes confirmed these findings with evidence that connections were made through “small talk” at the tables.

Compassionate professionalism
Students reflected on the experience in terms of traditional approaches to social work professionalism and shared insights about the benefits and
drawbacks of utilizing a personal and social approach to helping. Students were balanced in their responses, indicating that natural and organic connections can be helpful but have limits. One student noted that “People want someone who will be real and raw with them, not always putting on a ‘brave’ face.” Some students recognized the utility of human connections in a professional setting, indicating that “It is okay to establish these relationships because there’s nothing bad we are just making a new friend and discussing our lives. They may not have anyone else to talk to and this might make them happy.” Students also found that casual conversation was a way to demonstrate unconditional positive regard, noting that “It is a good thing to establish connections with clients because then they know that you care” and another noted that such connections would demonstrate “that their problems actually matter instead of just treating them like another case number.” Further, another student explained that “the more comfortable the client is with you, the more open they will be about their struggles. If they see you as this high and mighty person who they can’t relate to, they may be afraid to speak to you about what could be troubling them.” Some students noted the drawbacks of personal connections such as “because you are more invested, if something goes wrong, you may take it personally” and “it could get too relaxed and you lose your professional edge.”

Field notes indicated that both agency participants and students shared openly about their financial problems and experience with social welfare agencies. Field notes relating to both body language and noise level indicated that students were comfortable. One field note indicated that “everyone seemed relaxed” and that “various stories, questions, and remarks were entertained by those present.” Further, field notes from the semi-structured group interview indicated that many agency participants were entertaining those present by giving advice such as “Look outside the box!” and “Think of ways you can make the world better.”

Discussion

Since its inception, the social work profession has faced challenges related to its mission and methods. Compounding these challenges is the stubborn question of how to educate future social workers, preparing them for practice that is strength-based and evidence-based; reflective of an understanding of complex and intransigent social problems; and both compassionate and professional. The literature provides only some guidance, and recommendations are limited (Krumer-Nevo et al., 2009).

Educating social work students to respond to rural poverty with compassion requires innovative approaches to teach empathy and “poverty awareness” (Davis & Wainwright, 2005, p. 229, Frank et al., 2019). The tensions inherent in our profession raise complicated, pedagogical questions, but contemporary
literature suggests that experiential learning may be a promising practice (e.g., Bonnycastle & Bonnycastle, 2015; Segal, 2007; Timm et al., 2011); the research discussed here confirms the value of this pedagogical strategy.

*Bridging the Gap Together* provided an opportunity for experiential learning. First-year social work students exchanged letters with a local agency’s community members and then joined them for a meal. Students and community members participated in a discussion of the lived experiences associated with rural poverty. As summarized above, this experience combined student learning, intervention, and research. The project rendered rich data and produced deep learning experiences. Results suggest that students obtained a deeper understanding of poverty, with an increased awareness of its complexities and varied effects on families’ lives. An equally important finding pertains to human connection and resonates with the authors’ interest in considering carefully the current construction of professionalism. The importance of and need for human connection was expressed by participants and students.

*Bridging the Gap Together* was not designed as a long-term intervention, but it has been continued in response to the community participants’ interest in continuing a relationship with students. That the project offers mutual benefit for both students and community participants is of paramount importance to us. Future research is slated to focus specifically on the benefits to the community members. Following the meal and discussion, students expressed their enhanced sensitivity to the need for human connection – a need that community participants expressed and students shared. Students engaged in self-reflection, sharing that they needed to connect with people a bit more and their technological devices a bit less. It may be that a more compassionate version of professionalism – one that maintains boundaries but allows for personal connection – could be a way to model healthy relationships and provide a transitional infrastructure for community building. Future research will explore this possibility.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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